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AUTHOR'S DRAFT (DIFFERS SUBSTANTIALLY FROM PUBLISHED VERSION)

## **Mirroring Mentalities in George Wither's *A Collection of Emblemes***

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### **Abstract:**

Drawing on a number of emblems in Wither's *A Collection of Emblemes*, with a particular focus on mirror motifs, this paper explores how Wither expands on the morals given in Rollenhagen's original works. Wither's *Collection* exemplifies Renaissance understandings of how the mind and subject could productively extend into the world, in the emblem themes *and* as part of its own methodological rationale. At the same time the *Collection* demonstrates that in this account the physical is seen as problematically limiting, with the full capacity for human extendedness only achievable through death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

George Wither's *A Collection of Emblemes*, first printed in London in 1635, gathers together two hundred engravings that had been previously printed in Gabriel Rollenhagen's works *Nucleus Emblematum Selectissimorum* (Arnheim, 1611) and *Selectorum Emblematum Centuria Secunda* (Arnheim, 1613). The title page of Wither's collection describes the emblems as "quickened with METRICALL ILLUSTRATIONS, both Morall and Divine" (fig. 1), and further adds the ends and means of the collection as being "That *Instruction*, and *Good Counsell*, may bee furthered by an Honest and Pleasant *Recreation*." Recreate or re-create also capturing the double sense of quicken by similarly evoking a fertile slippage between notions of entertaining and of giving new life.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sophie Rietti and Daniel Andersson for their assistance with the various translations.

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In the Preface "To the Reader" he more elaborately sets out to defend the necessity of his chosen medium, not by any stock maneuver such as elevating the medium's status, but instead in terms of its crude capacity to motivate through mirroring the crude capacities of the common human mind:

*plaine and vulgar notions, seasoned with a little Pleasantnesse, and relished with a moderate Sharpnesse, worke that, otherwhile, which the most admired Compositions could never effect in many Readers* (sig. A1r)

While "Rymes, Fictions, or conceited Compositions" may sometimes "*obscure the Sense*" they may also "*be made use of, to stirre up the Affections, winne Attention, or help the Memory*" (sig. A1r). Such conceits he argues operate as a cognitive aid to the beginner in the same way as toys and learning the rudiments of language once served a purpose in a child's development:

*For, I know that the meanest of such conceites are as pertinent to some, as Rattles, and Hobby-horses to Children; or as the A.B.C. and Spelling, were at first to those Readers, who are now past them* (sig. A1v)

This apparently condescending recognition of general human weakness is in fact based in recognition of his own weakness, to authorize which *paired* recognition he calls on a biblical model:

*And as David said, His Heart shewed him the wickednesse of the Vngodly;...Even-so, I may truly acknowledge, that mine owne Experience hath showne mee so much of the common Ignorance and Infirmitie in mine owne person, that it hath taught mee, how those things may be wrought upon in others, to their best advantage.* (sig. A1r)

This tacitly links epistemological, phenomenological and moral capacities, and evokes the belief that effective insight into others is interlinked to self-knowledge, albeit ironically self-knowledge of one's own ignorance and infirmity.

Reflective of this, preceding the first of the four books the reader is faced with an image of the author himself accompanied by a metrical illustration entitled "The AUTHORS Meditation upon sight of his PICTURE" (fig. 2). He begins by juxtaposing the inferiority of the image, and of

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portraits in general, with the superior capacity of poetry to portray his true self, as he remarks the poetic verses are that “*which, in absence, will more truly show me,/ Than, outward Formes, to those, who think they know me*” (sig. A4r). Poetry versus pictorial image, Wither presents as participating in a more general hierarchy: with the poetic depicting the inward and immortal self versus the superficial outward pictorial image. Poetic ability to outshine pictorial representation is also a commonplace literary trope of the period: in Ben Jonson's brief address “To The Reader”, printed opposite Droeshout's portrait of Shakespeare in the 1623 Folio, the opening praise of the lifelike engraving of Shakespeare's face is belittled by Jonson's further comment that it is only in the book, and not in the picture, can Shakespeare's wit be found. Since Jonson had openly quarrelled with Inigo Jones over the respective merits of their literary and design contributions to their celebrated masques, his remarks may have a self-serving quality. Similarly Wither's remarks may in part serve a function by implying the superiority of his own literary contributions to the work over that of the appropriated engravings.

Rollenhagen seems to have suffered from similar qualms on account of his original adoption of the engravings. The same themes accompany his portrait in the preface to his *Selectorum Emblematum Centuria Secunda*:

*Umbra Juventutis, forma florentis Imago,  
Ut-nitet artfici reddita-cunq manu.  
Exterius talem finxit Natura;quod intus  
Mens agitat GENII est; vinetid INGENIO.* (sig. A2r)

[Shadow of youth, image of a flourishing form  
Shines forth however rendered by artistic hand  
Nature made him thus externally; that which, within,  
The mind engages in, are the product of a creative mind; it will live thanks to art]

Initially this appears a debate about whether inner mental qualities can be captured in visual representation, with this first verse of this laudatory poem by Valens Cremcovius seeming at first to argue that they can. Cremcovius juxtaposes the impression created by the artist's representation of the youth's image, with that “within” which the mind engages in, the inner thoughts that are the product of a creative mind. The capitalised (on) pun on mind [*GENII*] and

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art [*INGENIO*] then draws the two together, showily highlighting their resemblance. Yet the “within” refers not just to the biological mind, but also to the book, and it is through this, not the picture, that the mind will live. The second verse in small print that follows supports this reading, as it underlines the comparatively limited nature of visual art despite its wondrous capacity to create lifelike images:

*Enteres as; hilaris frons, lumina bina gemelli  
Sideris! en vetetis sincuput ingenii!  
ROLNHAGIDÆ, pingat si singular Zeuxis, acute  
Pingere num potis est, indolis effigiem?* (sig. A2r)

O smooth round coin; cheerful brow, two eyes of a twin  
Star! O, you bring to life this talented man's head!  
Were Zeuxis to paint all the details of Rollenhagen, surely  
It is not possible to paint the image of brilliant talent?

Thus Wither's portrait-preface appears to simply draw on the front matter conventions through which authors or their stand-ins promote the author and his writing both through, and in opposition to, the authorial portraits.

Yet Wither considers this at more length than these other examples, both in his preface and in the morals of the emblems in his *Collection*. A picture, like the living body, Wither contends, is but the “Shadow of a SHADE”, in contrast with the “Reall-being/ Which doth extend beyond the Fleshly-seeing” (sig. A4r). This conjures a Ficinian notion of the intellectual part of man as extended beyond and as constrained by the physical body, with the book's picture, as described by Wither, equivalent to the human body (Ficino 204-5). This extension of an ontological hierarchy, is also evident in the preface, where Wither comments that to the “*dumbe Figures*” that were “*little usefull*” he has added “*the life of Speech*” which “*may make them Teachers, and Remembrancers of profitable things*” (sig. A2r). There is more at stake here than just Wither's own status as an author, as can be more clearly discerned through examination of a dynamic set out by Ficino, who describes his work “*Five Questions concerning the Mind*” as in itself a reproductive “mind”:

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if we have concentrated our powers in this most fruitful part of the soul, then without doubt by means of this highest part itself, that is by means of mind, we shall ourselves have the power of creating mind; mind which, I say, is the companion of Minerva herself and the foster-child of highest Jove...I may perhaps have created, in a night's work, a mind of this kind, by means of mind; and this mind I would now introduce among you in order that you yourselves...may at some time bring forth an offspring (193-94)

These notions of the work itself as mind, of mind as divine, and that such textual minds can have productive effects on others, is echoed in Wither's meditation, where the emphasis falls most on the work's moral capacity to counter-reflect the divine in man. Wither looking now in "FAITH'S Prospective Glass" asks that what remains is that wherein "My MAKERS Image, *was in me renew'd*", and evokes the exemplary power of the book, through which "*I to others, may some Patterne be/ Of Doing-well, as other men to mee,/ Have beene whilst I had life*" (sig. A4v). Wither refers to the notion in Genesis of man as the image of God, in setting out his aspiration for himself *through* the means of the book to act in turn for others as a form of extended reflection. Since he adds that while he has lived other men have acted as exemplary models for him, and as he does not specify whether they are living or textual examples, there does not seem any distinction between the extended reflexivity that might be offered by a person in biological or bibliological form, with the focus simply on functionality. That the most significant aspect of the living Wither, himself as a pattern, may be distilled within the book, suggests a form of what we might also call the extended subjectivity, through which the self may be constituted by linguistic resources. The notion of mind as text or self links to the notion of "the extended mind" as put forward by Clark and Chalmers, in which it is argued that a dispositional belief might equally relate to knowledge stored in a book or in the memory, and thus that mind is not necessarily all in the head.

These dynamics may also be understood in terms of pervasive Renaissance beliefs in the power of a book to form a person; evoking both Montaigne's reflexive notion that as he write he not only shapes the book, it shapes him (612), and Edmund Spenser's notion of the subject-shaping purpose of *The Faerie Queene*: "The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a

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gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" (15). There are correlations as well as telling points of disjunction between contemporary and various historical notions of the extended mind or self. Wither presents this dynamic as potentially operative through linguistic forms' capacity to perform a reflexivity akin to that of one person to another and this in turn functions like self-reflection, but as a Puritan Wither also posits an underlying religious framework. He presents his need and ability to mirror mentalities as ultimately based on man's Fall and on his mirroring of God. Thus this introductory verse indicates more than just Wither's didactic intentions, revealing simultaneously the underlying moral and epistemological assumptions that frame Wither's worldview, with the social and linguistic associated with the mental and spiritual, which are thereby elevated above the pictorial through its association with the corporeal.

The theme of extended social reflexivity as an illuminating worldly parallel to the extended reflexivity offered by God resurfaces in a new form later in the book. The mirror-motif emblem, which the rest of this paper will focus on considering, is encircled with the motto "Ut ne quid dedeceat" ["Lest it be dishonourable"] (fig. 3) (249). In Rollenhagen's *Selectorum Emblematum Centuria Secunda* the Latin couplet underneath the engraving adds that "Ne quid dedeceat, facto caveamus in omni,/ Apta rei caput est, tempora nosse, suae" ["To avoid any dishonour, the most important thing is that we should have a care in everything we do to know what is seemly to its matter"] (91). Then in Rollenhagen's appendix the further quatrain given in French comments that the meaning of the engraving is that:

Comme dans le miroir se void la belle Dame  
Pour ne laisser en soy rien sans ornement:  
Ainsy doibt un chaseun ses meurs diligement  
Par tout considerer pour eviter le blasme.  
(sig. D1r)

[As the beautiful woman gazes at herself in the mirror  
So as not to leave anything in herself without ornament  
Thus ought each one of us to diligently consider our manners  
So as to avoid in every way any blame.]

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Thus Rollenhagen in both cases emphasizes that the emblem signifies the need for a reflective self-appraisal in order to avoid dishonor.

In his preface Wither claims an innovative approach to the engravings, asserting that rather than attempting to find out their original meanings, he has applied such meanings to them as arose in his mind: "I have not so much as cared to find out their meanings in any of these *Figures*; but, applied them, rather, to such purposes, as I could thinke of, at first sight" (sig. A2r). Through consideration of what Wither's metrical illustration contributes to the meaning of this particular engraving this claim can be assessed, at the same time as we consider how its interpretation reflects his methodological rationale. While Wither's couplet simply echoes Rollenhagen's version: "In all thine Actions have a care/ That no unseemlinesse appeare", in his metrical illustration he quickens and re-creates the emblem's significance (249). Beginning modestly within the tiniest and most trivial circle of significance, through the course of the metrical illustration Wither gradually extends the emblem's purport till, like a series of concentric circles at once stretching ever further outwards and inwards, its signification reaches ultimately to that of divine Grace. The significance of the glass-gazing woman Wither begins by literally interpreting in terms of a woman's examination of herself in a looking-glass, with this examination described as being performed in order to ensure that she in turn please the reflecting eyes of her lover or husband. Yet the self-examination so figured is, Wither goes on to explain, intended to more profoundly remind us how we might appear reflected in the eyes of God or of worthy men and therefore we must "trim" ourselves in a "faithful glasse" either using the ideal examples of pious men of the past or the evils of men of either "now or then" as admonitory examples (249). The mirror is also linked to the authorial self-portraits and to the frames of the emblem images, both of which mimic the circular shape of early Renaissance mirrors.

This interpretation of the emblem plays on the use of a mirror-motif to evoke an ideal or an admonitory example, which was widespread throughout the medieval period and the Renaissance both in images and texts (Anderson, 113-14; Grabes 1-11). For example, in the Second Part of Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth*, Lady Percy recalls her late husband Harry Percy, as follows:



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He was indeed the glass  
Wherein the noble youth did dress themselves  
.....  
So that in speech, in gait,  
In diet, in affections of delight,  
In military rules, humours of blood,  
He was the mark and glass, copy and book,  
That fashioned others. (2.3.21-22, 2.3.28-32)

Thus, such ideal mirrors were generally human subjects depicted as sharing a function with a technological resource. While it initially appears an inversion of the normal function of the mirror imitating the subject, since the perceiver should instead imitate the mirror, this follows the dynamic of customary courtly measures to improve appearance courtesy of the feedback of the visual supplement of the mirror. In the above quote the ideal mirror is described as having “fashioned” others who would “dress” themselves by it, through outward and inward imitation, while the listing together of “glass” and “book”, also reflects a recurrent epistemological slippage between these two technologies, which were both understood to be innovative providers of images for reflection and as shapers of human subjectivity.

Returning to Wither, we find that rather than “ancient glasses”, he recommends the emulation of examples drawn from our present surroundings, stating that a wife, companion, or loving friend may, through their very proximity, act not only as looking-glass, but as fountain, both reflecting and refreshing. (249) In this way, they are parallels to Wither’s “quickened” emblems, which, as we have seen, he describes as resources that both re-create and recreate. The friend provides good example, admonition, reformation and volition. Above and beyond this moral glass for human perfection there stands in turn the divine Law of Grace. This notion of glass and fountain might also be inspired by the dynamic background image of the man gazing at his reflection in the spring into which water is simultaneously being poured, apparently by a naiad; while the social and religious elements are gestured towards by the portrayal of a town with a church in the right hand of the image. This simultaneously references and dismisses the Narcissus topos, replacing it with a dialectical quest for self-knowledge. Thus, Wither transforms the focus of the emblem from signifying a closed circle in which only self and mirror-image are portrayed into one which more explicitly evokes humans’ self-knowledge and moral accountability as

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dependent on an ability to loop out into the social and religious spheres through forms of extended reflexivity. Rather than a closed circle of reflexivity with the social or divine only as an end, what is proposed then is a social and divine *means* to self-knowledge.

A socialising addition of Wither to the emblems are the games of chance that conclude the volume, which have moveable hands to be twirled around a pair of dials that respectively indicate the number of book and emblem to which the player should then refer (sig. Oo3v-Oo4r). Although, like the engravings, the lotteries are also presented as being necessary in order to please “*the vulgar Capacitie*” (sig. A2v). Following some of the import, although not the expansiveness or distinctions, of the metrical illustration, were you the player chancing upon book four and number forty-one, you would find yourself directly addressed in a lottery, (before being then referred to emblem 91 itself):

Thou thinkst, that thou from *faults* art free;  
And, here, unblamed thou shalt be.  
But, if to all men, thou wilt seeme  
As faire, as in thine owne esteeme,  
Presume thou not abroad to passé,  
Untill, by ev'ry *Looking-Glasse*,  
Which, in thy *Morall*, is exprest,  
Thou hast, both *Minde*, and *Body* drest. (267)

This particular lottery thus reflectively addresses the reader, while simultaneously instructing the reader's re-examination of him or herself in every available glass in which his or her moral capacity is expressed, in order that not only the body, but also the mind, be suitably dressed.

Regarding Wither's use of the word “glass” elsewhere in the volume, in the metrical illustration for emblem 35 of book 3 he similarly uses it in terms of a moral and divine reflexivity that operates as a guide, in his request “Lord, let thy sacred *Law*, at all times, bee/ A *Rule*, a *Master*, and a *Glasse* to mee” (169). The polyvalence of the word glass, casts multiple reflections on its every use, especially since it could refer to transparent glass forms as well as to the opaque glass of the mirror (Anderson, 105-6). Indeed, glass is most frequently used in Wither's Collection to refer visually and textually to the *memento mori* of an hour-glass, as in emblem 21 from book 1,

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whose metrical illustration draws on the running sands depicted within the glass of the emblem in its conclusion that “When we are *Borne*, to *Death*-ward straight we runne;/ And by our *Death*, our *Life* is new-begunne.” The illustrations for emblem 50 in book 3 and emblem 44 in book 4 similarly refer to the hour glass as a signifier of mortality, while the illustration of emblem 40 in book 4 more explicitly describes the hour glass's brittleness as representing the frailty of the body. A final example that is particularly illuminating of Wither's methodological rationale is the presentation of emblem 32 in book 2 by its illustration in terms that suggest that the emblem's circular form is in fact a convex glass that reflects the reader with his book (fig. 4). Beth Williamson has described how the viewer's relation to an image can sometimes be powerfully represented within the image itself. Williamson gives as an example of such an image in the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, a personal book of hours that dated from the late 1470's, in which Mary herself is pictured reading the book, whilst the background image viewed through a casement window, displays women in fifteenth century attire grouped before the Virgin and Child seated in a Gothic church, and so depicts how and on what Mary should be thinking whilst contemplating the book (139). The contemplative image of the cherub-like child at his book, thinking of the passing of time represented by the burning of the candle, in the running of the sands in the glass, and in the matter he reads, Wither suggests offers to the reader an image of the reader himself reading in Wither's *Collection*: “thy selfe apply/ To what it counseleth; and, *learne to die*,/ While that *Light* burnes, and, that *Short-houre* doth last” (94). In this way Wither recreates and quickens the figure, making it a more direct representation and a reflexive visual aid for the reader. This illustration concludes with Wither directly calling on God not to let he himself forget this moral, although again one is aware that he is setting the reader an example to be followed.

Are these notions of the mind as extended and of extended subjectivity and extended reflexivity operating via social, textual and technological resources a purely pre-Cartesian phenomenon? Debora Shuger puts forward the argument that the Renaissance mirror is grounded in medieval notions of an exemplary likeness: it is a means to see “saints, skulls, friends, offspring, spouses, magistrates, Christ” and so “lacks reflexivity, self-consciousness, and individuation, and hence differs fundamentally from what we think of as the modern self” (37, 35). Yet, the consciousness

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of an extended reflexivity that operates as a means to access one's own mind and self is a form of reflexivity that recent cognitive science, neuroscience and psychology has been uncovering as still fundamentally at work in the modern self, even if Western European awareness of it has decreased. The psychologist Stephen Kosslyn has recently defined as "social prosthetic systems" (SPSs) people that we "rely on to extend our reasoning abilities and to help us regulate and constructively employ our emotions"; he suggests that we have evolved these social systems for the same reason that Andy Clark explains that we employ bodily, technological and linguistic resources as mind tools: because our brains are limited (Kosslyn 2005, Clark 2003). The notion that technologies, texts and other people can and do supplement the means through which feelings, thoughts, words and actions are formed and evaluated, due to our biological cognitive limitations and adaptability, is arguably a paradigm that manifests in different forms in different contexts, or is to varying extents repressed by them. In the Renaissance, and particularly within George Wither's *Collection* with its moral and theological end, this extendedness is ultimately understood within a Christian schema that adds to this expression of the paradigm the role of the divine while disparaging the role of the body, with Wither exemplifying these beliefs both through the specific subject matter and as part of his methodological rationale.

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Fig. 1. George Wither, title-page, from *A Collection of Emblemes* (London, 1635). (With permission of the British Library.)

Fig. 2. George Wither, “The Authors Meditation upon sight of his picture,” from *A Collection of Emblemes*, sig. A4v (London, 1635). (With permission of the British Library.)

Fig. 3. George Wither, “Dedeceat ut ne quid,” from *A Collection of Emblemes*, p. 249 (London, 1635). (With permission of the British Library.)

Fig. 4. George Wither, “Vita Mortalium Vigilia,” from *A Collection of Emblemes*, p. 94 (London, 1635). (With permission of the British Library.)